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A two-track policy for Angola?

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As Jonas Savimbi arrived in Washington this week to plead his powerful case for effective American assistance to his National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), the Reagan administration was counting on his eloquence and pragmatic realism to disarm many of his critics on the left of the U.S. political spectrum.

In his capacity as field commander of more than 40,000 UNITA guerrillas, he led his forces last fall in turning back at the gates of his capital at Jamba a Soviet-directed and Cuban-supported armored thrust launched by the unelected MPLA Marxist regime that claims to be the government of Angola.

To all those congressional critics who claim that no U.S. military aid of any kind should be given to UNITA because it would identify the United States with racist South Africa and destroy the American role of honest broker in the region, Mr. Savimbi need only point out that the Soviets have already resupplied the MPLA forces with all the helicopters, tanks, and armored cars they lost in their failed offensive last autumn.

With Soviet rearmament and direction, the MPLA leaders are preparing for a new offensive when the rains end in June.

In order to defend his main bases in southeastern Angola and to avoid becoming too dependent on the South Africans, Mr. Savimbi desperately needs American help to counterbalance the \$1.5 billion worth of weapons and the 35,000 Cuban troops the Soviets have committed to the Angolan front.

Reagan officials are acutely aware that General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev's decision to complete this huge resupply operation has geopolitical ramifications that reach far beyond Angola.

If the MPLA army succeeds this coming June in overrunning UNITA's symbolic capital at Jamba and in reducing Mr. Savimbi's forces to a minor guerrilla nuisance hiding in the bush, the Soviet leaders will have succeeded in changing the world correlation of forces. They

will have opened up Zaire and Zambia to destabilization and set the stage for the radical polarization of the entire region.

In stark and simple terms, Mr. Savimbi can argue that the prompt delivery to his forces of the most advanced American anti-aircraft and anti-tank weaponry can enable him to maintain his bases, while reducing his dependence on South African assistance. The arrival of such help, even if provided covertly,

would send a signal throughout the region that the Americans are prepared to stand by their friends, and other countries that have hesitated to assist UNITA would be encouraged to do so.

The Reagan administration is also hoping that Mr. Savimbi will use the well-timed opportunity of his presence here to talk sense to his more vociferous supporters on the far right of the American political scene. Among some conservatives in Congress, there is the illusion that massive, open military aid to UNITA is what Mr. Savimbi wants in order

to win a clear-cut military victory over the MPLA.

In fact, Jonas Savimbi has always recognized, as the leader of the Ovimbundu tribe that makes up a third of the Angolan population, that an eventual end to the Angolan civil war can only be achieved by a negotiated national reconciliation that includes all tribal elements and involves a power-sharing arrangement between UNITA and the moderate forces in the MPLA. Only then will it be possible to have peace and free elections.

As he has recently written, Mr. Savimbi foresees that an eventual victory will not be won by a decisive military defeat in the field of the Soviet-supported troops, but by raising the cost of occupation by steady guerrilla envelopment to the point where the occupiers are forced to leave: A deal between UNITA and MPLA moderates would be the signal for Cuban troops to depart and would make it easier for South African forces to withdraw from Namibia.

Since Mr. Savimbi himself sees the necessity for a negotiated end to the struggle, Reagan officials are confident that he will clearly support the need for a two-track American approach to the Angolan problem.

In the past five years, the MPLA regime in Luanda has fought an escalating war with Cuban and Russian help, while at the same time continuing to negotiate with American officials and with South African diplomats for the possible departure of Cuban troops from Angola and South African forces from Namibia.

Now, with the Clark amendment repealed, the Reagan administration is in a position to adopt a similar two-track strategy of negotiating with one hand while arming UNITA with the other to increase the pressure on Luanda.

In order to keep the negotiating process going and to ensure the discreet cooperation of neighboring black states in getting arms delivered to UNITA it would clearly be preferable for the American military aid to be provided covertly and without publicity.

While Mr. Savimbi can be counted on to understand the need for such discretion, it's not at all clear that the House and Senate Intelligence Committees, as presently constituted, have the required self-discipline and sophistication. Both committee chairmen have already called for U.S. aid to be given overtly, if it is to be given at all.

Cord Meyer is a nationally syndicated columnist.